

WASHINGTON TIMES
29 April 1987ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1A

Philippine rebels build deadly path

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THE WASHINGTON TIMES

MANILA — Philippine communist guerrillas in eastern Luzon are carving out a Ho Chi Minh trail — a heavily mined 600-mile-long supply route that stretches almost the entire length of the country's main island and serves as vivid evidence of the rebels' long-range war preparations.

Rebel sources openly discuss the project. They say their goal is to control the long-neglected eastern coast of Luzon, where roads and electricity are sparse and where tens of thousands live in deep poverty.

Once completed, the mountainous route, called the "Sierra Madre trail," would serve to funnel arms, supplies and guerrillas from

Cagayan province in the far north to Camarines Sur province in the rebel-infested Bicol region. About half the route already has been carved out, rebel sources said.

Camarines Sur, an impoverished province of about 1 million people 250 miles south of Manila, conceivably could be a starting point for shipments of foreign-supplied arms. Military intelligence sources recently said an unidentified submarine had been spotted landing in Ragay Bay off Camarines Sur and dropping off a weapons shipment. But the report has not been confirmed by the military's high command.

Patterned after the Ho Chi Minh trail in Vietnam, the virtually inaccessible rebel route cuts through thick forests, dense jungles and the entire length of the treacherous Sierra mountain range in an area long neglected by the Philippine government.

There are few roads on eastern coasts and the ones that do exist rarely are paved and can't be used in the rainy season.

The Sierra Madre ranges protect the western coast (where Manila is located) from typhoons but isolate the eastern coast, where the rebels now are building a seemingly impenetrable stronghold.

Military sources admit that only the rebels are familiar with the terrain in eastern Luzon, having chopped away trees and underbrush and pushed away boulders to clear the route.

The rebels began work on the Philippine version of the Ho Chi Minh trail several years ago. Work on it was intensified after the collapse of a cease-fire with the Corazon Aquino government Feb. 8.

During the Vietnam War, the Ho Chi Minh trail stretched through two of Laos' south-central provinces bordering North and South Vietnam. The trail was a main supply route to the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces fighting in the south.

Philippine rebel commanders, for their part, are designating hundreds of guerrillas to work on the trail and it," a rebel source told The Washington Times.

A rugged 12-mile portion of the trail, recently visited by this reporter, passes over five mountain ranges and through dense jungle. The 600-mile-long trail ends in Camarines Sur. The Sierra Madres fade away here.

Rebel commanders said the guerrillas eventually hope to move thousands of weapons and foot soldiers from Camarines Sur to Cagayan.

"Our goal is to control the entire eastern coast, and we think we can do that within five years," a rebel source said.

The rebels said it would take the military "at least two days of hiking" to reach any parts of the trail, and from the air visibility generally is poor.

The trail is being laced with deadly mines, many of them constructed at a rebel explosives factory somewhere in the mountainous Camarines Sur province. Other explosive devices are manufactured at the factory as well, rebel sources said, although they would not provide further details.

Rebels in Camarines Sur said they used the cease-fire period between December and February to increase their arms and explosives, spread propaganda and recruit new troops.